

Geography Notes and Doodles by MidnightEverlark

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Summary: When Will accidentally hands Mike a personal sketchbook instead of a school notebook, he may as well have just handed Mike a full confession. Will realizes just a tad too late. Mortified, ashamed, Will flees to Castle Byers. Mike follows. (It's a sweet coming-out story with a happy ending, yo. Because Will Byers deserves a good day, okay?)

Geography Notes and Doodles

The plates clatter into the sink, smeared with peanut butter and jelly and scattered with bread crumbs, and Joyce Byers calls, "Watch those dishes!" from the living room.

Will calls back something vague and Mike rolls his eyes with a smile as he shoves paper, books, and pencils into his backpack. Two days ago, his mother caught him by the shoulder and held her hand at the crown of his head, measuring his height. Mike had given his friends a long-suffering grimace and they had laughed, filing past him and down the basement stairs.

"You'll be six feet tall before this growth spurt is over," Mrs. Wheeler had sighed as Mike wriggled free. "You're already all arms and legs. We'll have to get you more pants soon."

And it's true - a good couple of inches of sock are visible between Mike's sneakers and the hems of his jeans, and his bony wrists protrude from the sleeves of the jacket he shrugs on. He's always been taller than Will, but now when Mike says, "Well, see you tomorrow," Will has to tilt his head up to meet his best friend's eyes.

"Yeah," Will says, and if it takes his just a beat too long it's not because he's still not used to how tall Mike is now, or how his face has lost a lot of the baby fat it used to have. "Oh - did you still want my geography notes?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Mike was home sick yesterday with a cold, and Will immediately offered to lend him the notes from fifth period - their only shared class besides science, and Will's favorite. Art is a close second, but it can't beat sliding notes back and forth and whispering just enough to avoid a reprimand. Will grabs the worn, red spiral notebook from his backpack and hands it over.

This after-school studying routine is hardly new. They've been doing it for years, congregating at one house or another with snacks and books spread out over a table or the floor. Four pairs of arms and legs

getting in the way of everything, knocking over books and cups, voices overlapping and very little work actually getting done. But today Dustin had a dentist appointment right after school, and Lucas's family is driving fifty minutes to the nearest big city to go early-Christmas-shopping like they do every year, so Mike and Will are alone. And that's just fine with Will. He loves having the group all together, of course, but he cherishes these moments too. More than he'll admit aloud. It's calm, and companionable, and he can peek up from his work to watch Mike's frown of concentration as he scratches at his honors algebra worksheet.

It's something he's been doing nearly since they met. Stealing furtive glances because if he looks any longer it'll be weird. Because boys aren't supposed to memorize the features of other boys. They're not supposed to get a funny little twinge in their chest when their fingers brush as they hand over a notebook. They're not supposed to feel a little sad because they've long accepted that this is all it will ever be: studying and sleepovers and running jokes and lazy weekends at the arcade and flushed smiles in the excitement of a campaign finale and passing notes in class and hushed late-night radio calls. They're not supposed to want more.

They're not supposed to have a crush on their best friend.

"You okay?"

Will looks up to find that Mike's eyes have turned large and questioning. He hastily re-sets his expression to neutral and shrugs.

"Yeah. Just tired."

The words are so often repeated that they come out worn and hitched, like an old record. Half of what Will hears nowadays is some variation of, "Are you okay?" And he always shrugs and says, "Yeah," and provides some excuse. Usually it sets his teeth on edge, makes him want to turn away and snap, "I'm *fine*," makes him quiet for the next few minutes. Not with Mike, though. Somehow, Mike always seems to hit the tolerable area between casual and concerned. Like he cares if Will is doing okay, but he doesn't walk on eggshells around him. It redoubles the ache in Will's chest.

When Mike waves goodbye from the back door, Will gathers his own homework from the table and goes to dump it on his bed. His mind is already on the new X-Men comic book he bought with his allowance last week. Maybe he can get a soda from the fridge and lean against the foot of his bed and get lost in the glossy, slippery-new pages for a little while. The brightly colored front page is calling his name, sitting in a patch of sunlight on his desk, right next to his geography notebook.

His geography notebook.

Will is halfway through picking up the comic book, and it slides out of his hand and flops to the ground with a papery whisper. A papercut stings at the tip of one finger and he sticks it in his mouth, eyes locked on the worn, dull-red cover of the spiral bound notebook. *Geography*, it says, in his wobbly cursive.

And then confusion gives way to a cold, sinking, hollow feeling, and a band tightens around Will's chest.

Mike has his red notebook - his *other* red notebook. His sketchbook. Which isn't so bad except for the plethora of highly secret, highly embarrassing sketches and doodles scattered throughout the usual D&D drawings, aimless zig-zags, wizards, mythical creatures, and three-panel stick figure comics. Sketches of Mike's face, Mike smiling, Mike's name spelled out in various neat fonts. And hearts. Oh, god, there are hearts everywhere. He just handed Mike Wheeler a veritable confession that he never, ever intended to make, all spelled out over dog-eared, college-ruled paper.

"Oh god," Will says blankly, his mouth finally catching up with his brain.

"What?" He turns, not particularly surprised to find his mother hovering near his door. "What is it?"

He looks down at the geography notebook again. Maybe if he just takes a closer look, he'll realize that he gave Mike the right one after all.

But no.

"Wrong notebook." He looks back up and his mother and meets her confused frown. The numb dread dissolves abruptly. Will's heart picks up pace. "Wrong notebook!"

He's out the back door and halfway across the lawn before she can say anything else. His legs pound over the overgrown yard, early autumn wind flinging his bangs back from his forehead. There - Mike hasn't yet reached his bike. Will thanks the powers that be that they dismounted halfway down the long driveway today. He opens his mouth to call out. Lifts the right notebook over his head like a signal flag. Stops dead when he sees what Mike is holding.

Will's sketchbook. Open. Mike's pace slows, and then he stops too, a few feet from their discarded bikes. The wind flips a page, and Mike catches it. Works the perforated paper around the wire spiral. Traces his fingers over the paper. And then he turns another page, and another, another, another another another and Will's frantic heart is lodged in the back of his throat. He feels like he can't breathe, like he can't move. Mike's face is turned away from him, but he knows the exact expression that must be there. Disgust, anger, confusion. He doesn't want to see, can't bear the thought of looking into his best friend's eyes when he turns and says that he's sorry, but he just can't be friends with someone like Will, not anymore, not after -

But he needs to see. He needs to *know*. His nose is pricking, and he knows he's seconds from crying, but the longer he waits the more Mike will see, so he puppeteers his body the last few yards forward and stutters out, "M-mike -"

Mike whirls and slams the notebook shut. He presses it between his palms like everything inside will explode out if he lets it go. His whole face is about as red as the cover. And Will, to his complete and utter horror, begins to cry.

Five steps carry him within arm's reach, where he shoves the right notebook on top of the other one, and then he's running again. It's all he can think to do. All he knows how to do. He follows an old, deeply ingrained muscle memory, racing helter-skelter across the property line and between the trees as familiar as his own house. This is the route he takes every time he visits Castle Byers. The route he and Jonathan walked at least two dozen times when they were

constructing it, carrying supplies back and forth. The route he always travelled in the other place. The Upside Down. When the monster was near and he needed to run, to force his burning limbs into action and survive another few minutes, he would run this way. Away from the house, past the sparse red cedar shaped vaguely like a bird, over the slow-moving stream, through the clearing. Now, as he tumbles through the sheet-turned-front-door, his pulse thunders in his ears.

Arms locked around his knees, he listens. Another old habit. He knows, rationally, that he doesn't have to quiet his breathing or stay as still as he possibly can or keep his eyes trained on the fluttering bedsheet over the door, but it's a few minutes before he can force himself to uncurl. His face grows hot and sobs make his whole body jolt, and he beats a fist on the old duvet underneath him because he ruined it, he ruined *everything*. His stupid heart fell for his best friend and now Mike will hate him, he'll think he's disgusting, that he's *wrong*, and he'll be right. Everything Troy and the others say about him is right, and he tried so hard - *so hard* to keep it hidden, but now he ruined everything with his stupid drawings.

His blood freezes in his veins when distant footsteps crunch towards him, but it's just Mike. Well... "just" Mike. He can see the navy blue of his hoodie through a crack in the branches-and-tarp wall. Will shivers, rubbing his arms and realizing for the first time that he left the house with nothing but a short-sleeved shirt to guard against the cold. Goosebumps prickle under his hands.

Mike's shadow falls on the far wall, and the footsteps stop. There's a soft knock on one of the sturdier support beams, and then silence as he waits for Will to ask for the password. Instead, Will curls up again and silently urges Mike to just go away, just leave and let him be alone and cry until he feels sick and empty.

For the first time since Castle Byers was completed, Mike disregards the password rule and lets himself in. Something comes to rest just beside Will's leg, and when he lifts his head just enough to see, two red notebooks lie on the threadbare blanket beside him. Mike settles himself on the other side, and Will can't help but see the notebooks as a very deliberate barrier. A moat between Mike and Will. What Will did. What he is.

There's the nearly-inaudible click of lips parting, and a shallow breath, and he can't, he can't stand hearing the soft disappointment that's sure to weigh down Mike's words - or worse, the anger - so he speaks before the other boy can get a word out.

"I'm sorry, Mike," he whispers. It starts the tears going again, and he swipes at them angrily because he's so stupidly weak on top of everything else. He grits his teeth and everything inside him aches with the effort of controlling the lurches in his diaphragm. "I'm s-so sorry -"

"It's okay, it -"

"No, it's not!" Will snaps, surprising even himself with the intensity of the outburst. Mike draws back an inch, like he's hurt, and Will shakes his head. "You d-don't know. You don't know."

The inch of extra space disappears again and Mike is all big, understanding eyes and fidgeting hands and Will almost hates him for how good he is. Always such a good friend. This would be so much easier if they could just be horrible to each other and be done with it. "Then tell me."

"I like you." It comes up his throat in a rush, as if he expelled it from his stomach. He thought it would be harder. He thought after all this time of keeping it in, the words would get stuck in his throat. But there they are, sitting between them as tangibly as the notebooks, and Mike kind of blinks like someone pressed a restart button in his brain.

"What?"

Will's lips squeeze together and he looks up towards the tarp ceiling. Watching the ever-shifting shadows of dry leaves and branches makes him almost dizzy, and he blinks hard in an attempt to stop his eyes from streaming. But every time he tries to freeze his chest it just shakes out of control again, and he tastes snot in the back of his throat, and he's babbling again but he can't seem to just shut up. He gives up and drops his gaze to the ground at their feet.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I ne-ever meant to, I just - I know it's wrong, I

know it's... it's... it's weird, but I c-can't stop, and I -"

Movement flickers at the corner of his blurred vision, as if Mike moved an arm or shifted positions. "You - how -"

"I didn't mean - I don't - I k-know -" He doesn't know what he's saying, really, just that he has to say it, he has to say *something*, because if he stops then he has to hear what Mike will say, and he knows that will hurt more than anything else.

"Will."

"I know I embarrassed y-you and I'm s-sorry and -" His arms have been wrapped tightly around his middle, but he lifts a shaky hand to scrub ineffectually at his eyes. Then all at once he's looking at Mike, because maybe there is a way to salvage this, maybe - "I'll never talk about it again, I swear, I'll never -"

"Will!"

"I'll throw away the dra-awings, I'll stop, I swear I'll stop, just p-please don't hate me, Mikey, please don't hate me -"

Mike reaches out like he's going to touch his arm, but Will turns away, the childish gesture hiding his face again. Mike tries once more. "Will, stop -"

"I know you're mad at me, and that's -" His voice breaks hideously. "That's okay. I underst-tand. And you don't - you don't ever have to talk to m-me again, you can have your-r comic books back, and -"

And that's his breaking point. He presses his hands over his damp, blood-warmed face and sobs as quietly as he can. Some small, stupid part of him strains towards his best friend, aching to throw his arms around him, desperate for any small gesture of comfort or forgiveness, but there's nothing. The pallet beneath them wobbles. Mike is standing up. He's leaving. He must be. Will doesn't blame him.

"I'm sorry I ruined everything," he whispers. Because he is sorry, and he wants Mike to know before he never talks to him again.

He expects to sit and listen to Mike's footsteps retreat out of the fort, through the forest and out of Will's life, but there's no noise except the wind in the branches and the oblivious, happy twittering of birds for a long time. Maybe he wants to say something before he leaves. He wishes Mike would get on with it.

A pair of cold, slightly unsteady hands touch his wrists, and he startles enough to lift his face. He immediately looks down again and tracks the path of a beetle across the fort floor, *hating* the sad slant of Mike's eyes.

"Will," Mike says, softly. Getting ready to let him down. Gently. Like a good best friend. Will wants to scream. "I'm not -"

"I know." Will spits the words out as fast as he can form them. He doesn't want to find out what particular wording Mike would have used. "I know you're n-not, I'm sorry, I didn't mean -"

"No, Will, I'm not mad."

But Will is starting to babble again, and he's making less and less sense, but he can't stop. The words are as uncontrollable as the half-hiccups he's given himself by crying so hard. The corners of his eyes burn. They feel puffy and strange, and the skin of his face feels like a mask. He can't stop thinking about all the things he lost. Sleeping on the ground in the Wheelers' basement, listening to Mike's soft breathing until he falls asleep too. Their arms brushing at the lunch table. Mike's soft, dark eyes catching his own across the room. Spontaneous, stomach-fluttering hugs when a D&D monster is defeated. The breathless thrill of sharing a bike when Will's has a flat tire, their hands overlapping on the handlebars. All those little moments that meant so much more than they should. The butterflies and blushes and stupid, stupid drawings that he hid away in drawers and under his bed and in the back of the closet.

One of the cold hands moves to Will's cheek, and he rubs his nose against his short sleeve before looking up. Mike is kneeling in front of him, their faces so close that Will can count every faint freckle and feel the warm, nervous exhalation over his cheeks.

"What -" he says, and then Mike dips his head and kisses him.

Will's breath shudders to a halt. Emotions flicker through him, fast as strobe lights: surprise, confusion, hope, disbelief, incredulity, realization, and then *elation*, pure and bright and followed immediately by a wave of relief so potent that he whimpers. He pulls back abruptly, embarrassed, and sucks in the lungful of air that was postponed for three and a half seconds that felt like a decade.

"You don't hate me?" he blurts, hopeful and disbelieving and breathless.

Mike's head swings back and forth. His cheeks have achieved a delicate shade of scarlet that Will has never seen before. He's breathing as hard as Will, one hand still wrapped loosely around his wrist. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Will knows that he'll draw this moment over and over.

"You don't think I'm..." He cringes, Lonnie's voice echoing through his skull. "Disgusting and wrong and weird and -"

"No - no." Mike's grip shifts and he squeezes Will's hands. And then he laughs, sudden and ragged, and the smile on his face seems to release all the tension in Will's chest at once. It leaves him weak, trembling, and crying harder than ever, but Mike's fingers are still intertwined with his, and it's like a crooked part of the universe just *thunked* into place. His shoulders slump and he squeezes back.

Overtaken by a familiar impulse, Will mops at his face with a corner of the blanket they're sitting on, and, for the first time in his life, gives in to it. He leans forward - or maybe he just stops resisting the invisible current tugging his chilled body towards Mike's - and lifts his eyes until it seems like they're looking right through each other. Mike picks up on the silent question and inclines his head, and Will carefully, clumsily presses their lips together again. He dares to reach up and hold Mike's face in his hands. He can process more than just shock this time. It's warm. Warm and just a tad damp, most likely due to all the tears and snot he tried to wipe off on the blanket, but that doesn't matter because it's *right*.

When they pull away and Will licks his dry lips out of habit, he swears he can taste peanut butter and jelly. For some reason, it makes him laugh. Mike laughs along, sounding just as shaky and

short of breath as Will feels. His hand finally moves from Will's, coming to rest on his arm instead, and then Mike is yanking off his hoodie with an exclamation of, "Jesus, you're freezing!"

Any other day, Will would bristle at being coddled, but right now he can think of nothing better than being wrapped in a soft, slightly oversized hoodie that's still warm from Mike's body heat. It smells like ivory soap, the autumn wind, and like the shiny-hard plastic of action figures and radios. He knots his stinging-cold fingers in the fabric of one sleeve, and crushes Mike's palm with the other hand through the entire walk back to the house.

He can't believe this. Can't believe that after *years* of watching and pining and fearing and holding it all in and never, ever telling anyone and being terrified that if anyone found out - that if Mike found out... Imaginary conversations used to echo in his mind as he tried to go to sleep, taunting him, always ending badly. *What is wrong with you?* Mike's voice would spit in his mind, and Will would punch the pillow and flip over, resolving, as always, to keep his mouth shut. This... this is so completely different from everything he thought would happen - that he *knew* would happen - that it feels beyond surreal.

He doesn't pinch himself. If it's a dream, he wants to stay asleep as long as possible.

His mom is waiting on the porch when they emerge from the woods, pacing and wringing her hands. She discards her cigarette as soon as she sees them, rushing across the patchy lawn with a false smile plastered on. She's trying not to seem too worried, but her quick movements and too-cheerful voice give her away. Will doesn't mind. Not this time.

She ushers them inside, out of the light drizzle that started up on their way back, and piles them with blankets they don't need. She at first assumes that Will had another episode, but pauses in confusion when she sees his face. Will can't stop smiling. He feels like he's made of helium balloons, floating ten feet off the floor, a grin stuck on his face no matter how hard he tries to be neutral. He's so full of energy that he can't sit still, he feels like he'd bounce off the walls like a ping-pong ball if it wasn't for Mike's hand anchoring him to the couch, neatly tucked out of sight under the blankets.

Later, after Mike calls home to make arrangements to stay the night due to the improbability of prying Will's hand off of his own - not that he mentions that part - they perch on the edge of Will's bed. At the Wheeler house sleepovers are held in the basement, where there are toys and sleeping bags and thick walls to spare Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler from listening to four boys giggle all night. At the Byer's house, sleepovers are held in Will's room. Joyce produces a sleeping bag and an extra pillow from the linen closet and warns them not to stay up too late. It is a school night, after all.

Will sits abashedly while Mike leafs through the rest of his sketchbook.

Mike stutters and flounders for words as he confesses a secret of his own.

"I knew I wasn't - you know - because I did like girls," he says in a near-whisper, even though the door is closed and Jonathan is at work and Joyce is rooms away. "I just didn't realize... I didn't think about it, I guess, for a long time. I had crushes on *girls*. So why..." He shrugs, obviously struggling, and Will leans forward. Mike finally spits it out, stumbling slightly over the sounds. "So why did it feel like - like I had a crush on my best friend?"

The words fade to near-nothing by the end of the sentence, but Will heard. And he's cried far too much today, and *damn it Byers get it together*, so he punctuates the sniffle with a hug hard enough to count as a tackle. Mike huffs out a laugh, and then they're giggling and play-fighting just like normal. Just like always. Nothing ruined. Nothing different. Except now when a warm, happy glow swells in Will's chest and that unnamable thing pushes him towards his best friend, he doesn't have to pull back and bite his lip. Not this time. This time he leans forward, feeling irrationally shy, and bumps their lips together, only slightly off-center.

It's still so new, and it feels so fragile, and he won't be surprised at all if he wakes up alone in his room tomorrow, with everything the same as it always has been. But if it is real... if it is, then Will thinks he could sleep soundly for the rest of his life, no matter what monsters roam through his mind.